

The American creed is indelibly shaped by the documents of its founding. For more than two hundred years, Americans have looked to the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the *Federalist Papers* for guidance and inspiration. To Americans, these documents serve a role akin to scripture. Expressing truths, ideals, and hopes of what government could be, they provide citizens and statesmen a goal towards which to strive. Like followers of other scripture, however, the American public and government have continually fallen short of the lofty sentiments expressed inside the hallowed pages of these documents. Within the documents, the Founding Fathers outlined their beliefs on fundamental questions that form the basis of government. Most significantly, the Founders advocated for a republican form of government because of their convictions that the right to rule must be derived from the people, the purpose of government is to protect fundamental liberties and to give citizens the ability to achieve a good life, and government must constrain itself to protect against tyranny.

The fact that the preamble to the Constitution begins with the line “We the People of the United States” is neither a coincidence nor a mistake. Instead, it serves to consciously emphasize that the authority of government exists only with the support of its people. To the Founders, the people were of utmost importance in deciding power, government, and who should rule. Writing *Federalist #51* in 1788, James Madison, the father of the Constitution, maintained that “all authority” of government “will be derived from and dependent on the society” (Madison, *Federalist*. 51). To Americans then, society and government are integrally connected. This mindset was instrumental in guiding American thinkers as they formed the blueprint for the American system.

The importance of the people in deciding the legitimacy of rule acted as a major piece of American theory fueling a desire for independence from England and the rejection of monarchy as a legitimate form of government. Drawing upon the English Enlightenment philosopher John Locke’s theories, Thomas Jefferson, in the Declaration of Independence, eloquently articulated the belief that government only derives its “just Powers from the Consent of the Governed” (53). In other words, government entails an unwritten agreement or social contract between the citizens of a state and its rulers. Logically then, a leader cannot rule unless his reign is accepted and allowed by society. A ruler that leads arbitrarily, commonly commits injustice, or acts outside the confines of the law cannot expect impunity for his actions. This strain of logic was not necessarily new to the late eighteenth century. The ancient Athenian philosopher Aristotle espoused a belief in the sanctity of the common interest of the community and the people. Writing in his *Politics*, Aristotle argued that “governments which have a regard to the common interest are...true forms; but those which regard only the interest of the rulers are all defective and perverted forms” (71). Enlightenment thinkers and the American Founders readily expanded upon this idea. In the Declaration of Independence, the Founders criticized King George III of England for his abuses of power against the people and called for the creation of a new and independent state in 1776. They rejected the monarchy and its propensity to devolve into tyranny. From this rejection, the architects of the American state concluded that the people must have a role in government.

Still drawing from Enlightenment ideas regarding the authority of the people, the leaders of the nascent United States eventually created a strong federal republic. This new government did not form immediately, however, as the Founders spent years wrestling with the question of who should rule. After the Revolutionary War, America followed the Articles of Confederation, a weak and decentralized form of government. Under the articles, the national government struggled as it possessed no power to regulate commerce, tax, or raise and pay an adequate army. These faults led to a Constitutional Convention in 1787 to replace the floundering government. Led by

Virginian James Madison and New Yorker Alexander Hamilton, this convention created the system Americans still enjoy today. Madison, Hamilton, and the other signers of the Constitution believed in government that, in the words of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, was "of the people, by the people, and for the people" (Lincoln). The government they created, like all governments, would derive its authority from the people, but it would go further by maintaining a direct link with the populace through elections for representatives in a republic. Fittingly, the first and longest article of the Constitution, Article I, outlines the important role of the people's arm of government, the House of Representatives and the Senate. The people are supreme. An obvious question arises, however, as to why the Founders supported a republic over a democracy. To fully examine this question, it is necessary to understand what the Founders viewed as the purpose of government.

The Founders believed that government's purpose was to protect fundamental liberties and the ability to pursue life to its fullest. They drew their beliefs and inspiration from an amalgam of political theory. From philosophers of old like Aristotle, they borrowed the notion that the state should provide for the basic survival of its people. The Founders, however, rejected Aristotle's conviction that the state must also provide citizens with a means for achieving the "good life" (73). Instead, they borrowed from contemporary political theorists of the Enlightenment the idea that virtue was not to be pursued, as Aristotle argued, in the public and political sphere, but in private life. The American Founders, however, unlike their Enlightenment counterparts, maintained that government had a vital role in protecting an individual's ability and opportunity to obtain a certain quality of life. The Founders emphasized that government should protect its citizens in their attempts to achieve the good life. One of the most famous assertions of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence "that all Men...are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights" such as "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" illustrates this mixture of both ancient and contemporary political thinking in the American system (53). Thus, the Founders clearly drew from a variety of unique sources in crafting their nuanced political theory. On one hand, the American Founders were convinced that government should protect fundamental rights, but, on the other, they also believed that government should serve in some capacity to bring about happiness and a good life.

To fulfill the Founders' main purposes for America's new government, a republic was necessary to prevent human corruption and ambition from eroding vital rights and liberties. Their belief in the vast shortcomings of man, which is implied within their vision of government's dual purpose, informs much of this idea. In this mindset, government is made necessary because human beings naturally do not respect others' fundamental rights. As James Madison famously expressed in *Federalist* #51, "if men were angels, no government would be necessary" (Madison, *Federalist*. 51). The fact that people are not perfect dictates the need for limitations and controls. Government is the tool to provide such constraints. The treatment of the colonists under British rule certainly influenced American thinkers' view on the need for limits as the Declaration lists many of the king's abuses against what the colonists saw as their natural rights. Early Americans learned from their experiences that rights must be protected from government as much as they need to be defended by government. The Founders entrusted government with a vital role, but they were also immensely skeptical about allowing it too much power. To fulfil its purpose then, government must not infringe upon the rights of its citizens, but, at the same time, it must also be powerful and active enough to provide for security and adequate resources for its constituents to exercise their rights. Moreover, the Founders believed that power must not be allowed to congregate and turn to despotism. Acutely recognizing this fallibility and corruptibility of humankind and of politics, the

creators of the American system realized that they needed to establish limits. They settled on founding a republic and crafting institutional confines to curb tyranny and prevent any violations of fundamental rights. In this light, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the necessity of republicanism becomes even more apparent.

In their quest to reach the mean between power and limitation, the Founding Fathers drafted the Constitution and created a nuanced form of republicanism. The Constitution establishes a working and powerful government, yet it also lays out specific limits for that government. For instance, Article I, Section IX of the Constitution enumerates laws that Congress cannot pass, and the Bill of Rights provides key constitutional provisions that expressly limit governmental power. Additionally, the Constitution establishes a marked separation of powers between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. In doing this, Madison and the Founders intended to use “ambition” to “counteract ambition” and reduce the risk of tyranny through checks and balances (Madison, *Federalist*. 51). James Madison, the architect of the Constitution, also feared that factions would infringe upon the rights of others. In attempting to lessen the probability of factions, Madison in *Federalist* #10 advocated for a republican remedy to the “mischiefs of faction” as democracy is “incompatible with personal security or the rights of property” (Madison, *Federalist*. 10). Direct democracies, he argued, were prone to corruption and factious majorities. A republic, however, could extend to a greater number of people and consequently a greater number of interests thus limiting the ability for factious majorities to form (Madison, *Federalist*. 10). For these reasons, Madison and the other signers of the Constitution thoroughly endorsed a republic as a protector of liberty and the proper safeguard against tyranny and the violations of rights.

Supporting a republican government ruled by the people in order to defend people’s rights, the American Founders established a government designed to accomplish its purpose while avoiding tyranny. Interestingly, their idea of government stressed the importance of the people in giving the government its authority and in ruling, but it also limited the ability of corruption or passion within the electorate to take hold and prevent the government from fulfilling its true aim. The documents that serve as the basis for the American system encompass difficult and nuanced instructions. Just like religious texts and dogmas, the Founder’s doctrines and writings offer adherents similarly difficult instructions along with hope, advice, and ideals. This American creed provides powerful theories on creating and maintaining a better system of government.

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